

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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February 12, 2020

SENT VIA U.S. MAIL AND EMAIL

Katharine.Sullivan@usdoj.gov

The Honorable Katharine Sullivan
Head of the Office of Justice Programs
U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Justice Programs
810 7th Street NW
Washington, DC 20531

Re: Unconstitutional federal grant to Hookers for Jesus

Dear Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General Sullivan:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation to object to the Department of Justice granting \$530,190 over three years to Hookers for Jesus (HfJ), an organization that requires attendance at church worship and bible studies to receive the aid it will provide with federal dollars. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 30,000 members across the country. FFRF protects the constitutional separation between state and church and educates about nontheism.

We do not write to address the impropriety of awarding federal grants to less deserving organizations because of their political connections—we understand the Inspector General has already been asked to investigate this aspect of the HfJ grant. We write to address taxpayer funding of an organization that purports to help women, but conditions that aid on attending church and bible study. The grant is unconstitutional and must be rescinded immediately.

According to *Reuters*, Hookers for Jesus “maintained a policy of requiring guests to participate in religious activities, internal program manuals obtained . . . show.”¹ HfJ also forced the victims to attend worship services at HfJ founder, Annie Lobert’s, church. HfJ banned secular literature, while presumably recommending the bible. The HfJ staff training manual claimed that homosexuality is immoral and that drug abuse is “witchcraft.”²

¹ Sarah N. Lynch, “Exclusive: Justice Department anti-human trafficking grants prompt whistleblower complaint,” *Reuters* (Feb. 10, 2020), available at <https://reut.rs/2ULi456>.

² *Id.*

HfJ's mission is religious. This is borne out by the HfJ website. The first sentence on the HfJ "Mission" page is not about helping the most vulnerable members of society, but about converting them:

MISSION

Jesus called out to them: "Come follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people!" Matthew 4:19

Mission: Jesus called out to them: "Come follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people!"
Matthew 4:19

Victimized women are the fish, help and aid are the bait, and HfJ wants converts. The clumsy wordplay on the HfJ site and literature (hookers, hook, fishing) does not mask the obvious point: HfJ's primary mission is to bring vulnerable women to Jesus. It simply offers this help, now federally-funded, as bait.

Again, this is made clear on the HfJ website. Even a cursory glance should raise alarms. The central program HfJ runs, Destiny House, is described on its website like this: "The Destiny House is a faith filled free 6–12 month program."³ The first descriptor used is "faith filled," not "free."

The only two testimonies on the HfJ website, which have been there for six years,⁴ read as Christian conversion stories:

Carrie: "When I came in (to The Destiny House) I was an unbeliever ... but I knew God was real. I got saved when I went to church. I got healed by God and He planted a seed inside of me that is growing daily. [...]"

Renee: [...] "Being in the Destiny House was such a great stepping stone to a (normal) life. It was everything combined... (that) helped me grow closer to Jesus. [...] I really feel Jesus has changed me from the inside out. [...] I am looking forward to where God is going to take me on this journey."

HfJ denies the import of these testimonials and that Christian worship is mandatory, but their internal documents and the State of Nevada show this to be untrue. As *Reuters* explained, Nevada refused to give state money to HfJ "after the state obtained Hookers for Jesus program manuals saying it was 'mandatory' for guests of the group's shelter, Destiny House, to attend services and volunteer at a

³ <https://www.hookersforjesus.net/destiny-house/>

⁴ See, e.g., website of 8 Oct 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20141008072100/http://www.hookersforjesus.net/what-we-do/>. Bracketed ellipses indicate abridgment for this letter. All other annotations and alterations in original.

specific church.” Another state grant reviewer “observed the program seemed too controlling and expressed concern it forced victims to attend Bible study.”⁵

It may be the case the HfJ provides some valuable services to victims, but it is clear that any aid is conditioned on a willingness to accept or endure Christian proselytizing. That makes the program ineligible for federal funds.

The federal government cannot fund programs that seek to convert people, even if the bait that program uses is otherwise legitimate aid. The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment prohibits any “sponsorship, **financial support**, and active involvement of the sovereign in religious activity.” *Walz v. N.Y. Tax Comm’n*, 397 U.S. 664, 668 (1970) (emphasis added); *see also Mitchell v. Helms*, 530 U.S. 793, 819 (2000); *Bowen v. Kendrick*, 487 U.S. 589, 621 (1988); *Roemer v. Bd. of Pub. Works*, 426 U.S. 736, 754-55 (1976); *Hunt v. McNair*, 413 U.S. 734, 743 (1973).

This rule alone is enough to require that the DOJ-OJP rescind the grant to Hookers for Jesus. But the Supreme Court has also specifically held the government may not fund projects, including buildings such as the Hookers for Jesus’s Desinty House, that are used for religious worship. *See Comm. for Pub. Educ.v. Nyquist*, 413 U.S. 756, 777 (1973) (striking down renovation grants to parochial schools because the buildings were used for sectarian purposes); *Tilton v. Richardson*, 403 U.S. 672 (1971) (holding unanimously that government construction grants are unconstitutional if the buildings are ever used for religious activities); *Hunt v. McNair*, 413 U.S. 734 (1973) (upholding government bond only because the bond-financed buildings were barred from being used for religious activities).

On behalf of our 30,000 members, we ask that you examine the above facts carefully, reconsider the grant, and rescind the funds. This is not a close case. Please respond in writing with assurances that this issue has been resolved.

Sincerely,



Andrew L. Seidel
Constitutional Attorney
Director of Strategic Response

⁵ See Lynch, *Reuters* supra note 1.